7 Additional Comma Uses & Misuses

Commas <u>should</u> be used:

A. To Separate Items in a List

In any list of three or more items, each item must be followed by a comma. The comma before *and* is optional. You will not be asked to choose between a version with the comma and a version without.

Correct: The open-storage display brings over 900 vintage World's Fair souvenirs out of attics, desk drawers, **shoeboxes, and museum** archives for visitors to view.

Correct: The open-storage display brings over 900 vintage World's Fair souvenirs out of attics, desk drawers, **shoeboxes and museum** archives for visitors to view.

No comma should be used **after** the word *and*.

Incorrect: The museum's open-storage display brings over 900 vintage World's Fair souvenirs out of attics, desk drawers, **shoeboxes, and, museum** archives for visitors to view.

Incorrect: The museum's open-storage display brings over 900 vintage World's Fair souvenirs out of attics, desk drawers, **shoeboxes and, museum** archives for visitors to view.

The only exception is when the word *and* is followed by non-essential information. In that case, a comma is required to set off the phrase or clause.

Correct: Deserts are found on every continent, including Antarctica. They are often the site of unusual rock formations **and, in some cases,** amazing archaeological finds.

When the items in a list consist of long phrases, or are punctuated internally by commas, they can also be separated with semicolons. However, commas and semicolons should not be mixed and matched.

Incorrect: Among Marie Curie's achievements were the development of the theory of **radioactivity;** the invention of techniques for isolating radioactive **isotopes,** and the discovery of the elements polonium and radium.

Correct: Among Marie Curie's achievements were the development of the theory of **radioactivity;** the invention of techniques for isolating radioactive **isotopes;** and the discovery of the elements polonium and radium.

B. Between Two Adjectives Whose Order Could be Reversed, OR That Could Be Separated by the Word "And"

When the order of the adjectives does not matter, a comma should be used to separate them.

Correct: One of the Queens Museum's recent exhibits featured works by contemporary artists from Japan, Taiwan, and Ireland, offering patrons the chance to see a kind of **innovative, passionate** art that larger museums often ignore.

Correct: One of the Queens Museum's recent exhibits featured works by contemporary artists from Japan, Taiwan, and Ireland, offering patrons the chance to see a kind of **passionate, innovative** art that larger museums often ignore.

Alternately, you can try placing the word *and* between the adjectives. If they make sense when separated by that word, a comma should be used.

Correct: One of the Queens Museum's recent exhibits featured works by contemporary artists from Japan, Taiwan, and Ireland, offering patrons the chance to see a kind of **innovative and passionate** art that larger museums often ignore.

Correct: One of the Queens Museum's recent exhibits featured works by contemporary artists from Japan, Taiwan, and Ireland, offering patrons the chance to see a kind of **innovative, passionate** art that larger museums often ignore.

C. After Introductory Words and Phrases

Introductory words and phrases (e.g., *in fact, moreover, as a result*) should be set off by commas.

Correct: **At first,** it looked as if the storm was going to miss us by a few hundred miles.

Correct: **Nevertheless,** Armstrong persisted and became an extraordinary musician.

Correct: Desserts were traditionally characterized by their sweetness. **However,** bakers are now creating ones that feature intriguing blends of sweet and savory.

To reiterate: **subordinating conjunctions such as *although* and *because* <u>cannot</u> be used this way**.

Incorrect: Desserts were traditionally characterized by their sweetness. **Although,** bakers are now creating ones that feature intriguing blends of sweet and savory.

Commas should NOT be used:

A. Before or After Prepositions

To review, prepositions are **location** and **time** words such as *of, for, from, to, in, with, by, about* and *between*. Do not use a comma **before or after** a preposition.

Incorrect: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most influential **figures, in** the history of computer science and mathematics.

Incorrect: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most influential **figures in,** the history of computer science and mathematics.

Correct: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most influential **figures in** the history of computer science and mathematics.

The only **exception** to this rule occurs when a preposition is used to begin a non-essential clause.

Correct: Although Ada Lovelace lived nearly a century before the first computer was built, she, **in a way that was unique among nineteenth-century mathematicians,** foresaw many of the modern computer's capabilities.

B. Between Adjectives and Nouns

This rule is particularly important when you are working with multiple adjectives or lists. Though commas are required between items in a list, no comma should be placed between the final adjective and the noun.

Incorrect: Headquartered in New York City, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS) is a well-known **national, organization** with local chapters in cities around the United States.

Correct: Headquartered in New York City, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS) is a well-known **national organization** with local chapters in cities around the United States.

C. Between Adjectives, When the First Modifies the Second

If the first adjective modifies the second adjective, OR if two adjectives could not normally be separated by the word *and*, no comma should be used.

Incorrect: Created in Jamaica during the late 1960s, reggae music emerged from a number of sources ranging from **traditional, African** songs and chants to contemporary jazz.

Correct: Created in Jamaica during the late 1960s, reggae music emerged from a number of sources ranging from **traditional African** songs and chants to contemporary jazz.

In the above sentence, *traditional* modifies *African songs*. In addition, you would not say *traditional and African songs*. As a result, no comma should be used between the adjectives.

D. Between Subjects and Verbs

Unless a subject and verb are separated from one another by a non-essential clause, no comma should be placed between them.

Incorrect: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage, **were** two of the most influential figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Correct: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage **were** two of the most influential figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

This rule holds true even when subjects are extremely long and complex, as in the example below. Even though you may feel that a pause is necessary, in strict grammatical terms, no comma should be used.

Incorrect: What is particularly remarkable about Ada Lovelace's work on Charles Babbage's "analytical **engine,**" **is** that Lovelace foresaw many of the ways in which computers are used today.

Correct: What is particularly remarkable about Ada Lovelace's work on Charles Babbage's "analytical **engine**" **is** that Lovelace foresaw many of the ways in which computers are used today.

E. Between Compound Items

When two nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. are joined by the word *and*, no comma should be used.

The easiest way to approach this rule is as follows: because *comma* + *and* = period, plug in a period in place of *comma* + *and*. If two complete sentences are **not** present, no comma should be used.

Compound Noun

Incorrect: **Ada Lovelace, and Charles Babbage** were two of the most influential figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Plug in: **Ada Lovelace. Charles Babbage** were two of the most influential figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Correct: **Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage** were two of the most influential figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Compound Adjective

Incorrect: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most **important, and influential** figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Plug in: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most **important. Influential** figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

Correct: Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage were two of the most **important and influential** figures in the history of computer science and mathematics.

F. Before or Around "Self" Words

"Self" words (formally known as **emphatic pronouns**) are used to emphasize that particular people or things are being referred to. Each object pronoun has an emphatic counterpart, e.g., *me, myself; it, itself; them, themselves.*

Although constructions containing these words may sound strange to you, there is nothing inherently wrong with them. In fact, the only thing you need to know is that it is **incorrect** to place a comma before a "self" word, or before and after one.

Incorrect: The Tower of London, which lies within the Borough of Tower Hamlets, is separated from the **city, itself** by a stretch of open space.

Incorrect: The Tower of London, which lies within the Borough of Tower Hamlets, is separated from the **city, itself,** by a stretch of open space.

Correct: The Tower of London, which lies within the Borough of Tower Hamlets, is separated from the **city itself** by a stretch of open space.

In most cases, it is also incorrect to place a comma after an emphatic pronoun.

Incorrect: The Tower of London, which lies within the Borough of Tower Hamlets, is separated from the city **itself,** by a stretch of open space.

However, when a comma would normally be necessary (e.g., before a FANBOYS conjunction or to set off a non-essential clause), it is acceptable to place a comma after an emphatic pronoun.

Correct: The Tower of London is separated from the city **itself, but** it is nevertheless one of London's most popular tourist attractions.

In the sentence above, *comma + but* is used to separate two complete sentences. The first sentence just happens to end with the word *itself.*

Exercise: Additional Comma Uses and Misuses (answers p. 211)

1. In areas where human activity occurs in close proximity to wildlife, it was long assumed that animals would change their habits to avoid people. However, a study led by Professor Laura Prugh of the University of _____ that even in remote, rarely visited national parks, nearly any level of human activity in a protected area can alter animals' behavior.

Ⓐ Washington, found
Ⓑ Washington found,
Ⓒ Washington found,
Ⓓ Washington found

2. Bright stars acted as compasses that helped ancient Polynesian mariners navigate between the many islands of the Pacific Ocean. Using double-hulled canoes, they were able to make _____ within the immense Polynesian triangle.

Ⓐ contact, with nearly every island
Ⓑ contact with nearly every, island
Ⓒ contact with nearly every island
Ⓓ contact with nearly every island,

3. Originally established by the British crown, the Postal Service became essential to the American Revolution. The development of a mail network among the colonies facilitated _____ between pockets of resistance that otherwise might have remained isolated.

Ⓐ communication, and coordination
Ⓑ communication and coordination,
Ⓒ communication and coordination
Ⓓ communication, and, coordination

4. Throughout his writing, Montaigne manages to give the impression of being ready to commit to paper his every thought. As a result, the reader feels as if he were attempting to capture _____

Ⓐ the process of thinking, itself.
Ⓑ the process of thinking itself.
Ⓒ the process, of thinking itself.
Ⓓ the process, of thinking, itself.

5. Having appeared sometime around 1500 BCE, Sanskrit is one of India's 22 official languages. Despite its association with classical Indian culture, it is still used in many _____.

Ⓐ hymns, mantras, and chants.

Ⓑ hymns mantras, and chants.

Ⓒ hymns; mantras, and, chants.

Ⓓ hymns, mantras and, chants.

6. Although there was no contact between Japan and Britain during the prehistoric era, there are surprising parallels between them. In both places, inhabitants built stone circles, crafted elaborate pots, and used flaked stone tools. Furthermore, the _____ bear striking similarities to the circle at Stonehenge.

Ⓐ astonishing Japanese stone circles at Oyu,

Ⓑ astonishing, Japanese stone circles at Oyu

Ⓒ astonishing Japanese stone, circles at Oyu

Ⓓ astonishing Japanese stone circles at Oyu